

THE ROWFANT BOOKS.

THE sale of the Rowfant Library to an American bookseller, acting on behalf of a customer, must be reckoned the most important transfer of books from one side of the Atlantic to the other that has yet taken place. It is true that the Bennett collection sold for a far larger sum, and was connected in part with the name of a far greater man than Mr. Locker. But the books and manuscripts which William Morris had collected were mostly foreign, and though it is a thousand pities that no catalogue of them was compiled as a permanent record of his skill in bringing them together in so short a time, the most easily flurried Englishman could hardly find a reason why books mainly imported from Germany during the course of a few years should stay here for ever. The Locker collection is on altogether a different footing. Though insignificant both in size and value when compared with some other English libraries in private hands, not to mention the great public ones, its actual contents were intrinsically far from unimportant. A fairly good First Folio and some thirty Shakespeare quartos, including most of the best, with almost all the pseudo-Shakespearean plays in first editions, formed a nucleus round which were grouped early editions of all the dramatists from

Lyly to Shirley, most of them now very rare and valuable, while one or two copies were unique. In the poets and pamphleteers the collection was almost equally rich. Of Daniel there were nine early editions, of Dekker twenty-three, of Greene twelve, of Lodge seven, of Nash eight, and of Rowlands nine. Spenser, Sidney and Milton were all well represented. A copy of Chapman's 'Iliad' was rendered doubly interesting by having belonged to Pope (who bought it for three shillings), and if Mr. Locker had pleased he might have made it trebly so by inserting into it the sonnet 'On first reading Chapman's Homer' in Keats's autograph. In the second half of the catalogue the poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth century was still more strongly represented, almost every masterpiece having been acquired in its first edition. Besides the printed books, moreover, there was a choice little collection of autograph letters (including thirty-nine of Lamb's), mostly highly characteristic of their authors, and a few manuscripts, such as those of Keats's 'Eve of St. Agnes' and Scott's 'Harold the Dauntless.' After the original catalogue was published first Mr. Locker himself, and afterwards his son, to fill gaps in the collection added numerous English books, and also a few foreign masterpieces, such as the first editions of 'Le Roman de la Rose,' of 'Don Quixote,' and the best plays of Molière.

Clearly a collection which contained such treasures as have here been enumerated, after refreshing my memory for a few minutes with the two catalogues, was far from an ordinary one. Its great

distinction was that, both in its original form and as subsequently added to, it was absolutely homogeneous, pervaded by a single idea, and that the highest at which a collector can aim; for though it is good to collect the masterpieces of printing, or of book-illustration, or of bookbinding, it is surely best of all to collect the masterpieces of literature, and no collector before Mr. Locker had ever done this with such skill and discrimination as were here displayed. In Mr. Locker's days the ideal of the single cabinet, as opposed to the indiscriminate ingatherings of a Heber, was quite new in England. He made it his own and gave it the highest possible application. If such a collection had been dispersed without having been first permanently recorded in a catalogue a great example would have been lost, and Mr. Locker's now indisputable title to a niche in the gallery of book-collectors, as distinguished as that occupied by Grolier, might have been hopelessly obscured. Even with the catalogue as its permanent record, it is greatly to be regretted that the collection could not have been kept intact. The foreign books are now for sale separately, the manuscripts are finding their ways to various American collections, the English books have been picked over by the American bibliophile for whom they were bought, and the ultimate disposal of those he has rejected does not at present appear to be known. When a property is sold it is not easy to dictate the use which shall be made of it, but it would certainly have been preferable if in New York, St. Louis or Chicago, or in one of the American universities

the Rowfant books had found a new home, where they would have remained for ever intact as a permanent memorial of their collector's skill.

It may have been observed in this last sentence that it is taken for granted that, though the precise destination of Mr. Locker's library might have been different, its transfer to America was practically certain. The attitude which the writers in English newspapers take up to these transfers is singularly unreasonable. They seem to regard the possession of fine libraries as a matter of international rivalry, a kind of Cup Race, in which individual book-owners ought to keep up the credit of England in the spirit of Sir Thomas Lipton, entirely at their own expense, without any regard to their finances. All this is surely very absurd. Since Panizzi's days it has always been the ideal of the British Museum to make its foreign collections second only in each case to that of the National Library of the individual country. A German may regret that this or that rare German book is in London and not at Berlin or Munich; but he must surely take a pride in the fact that German books are valued and studied in England, and Englishmen can hardly be less pleased that English books should be valued and studied abroad. If this applies to other foreign countries, surely it applies overwhelmingly to America. The more English books are valued in America, the more closely will England and America be drawn together. English journalists delight in this rivetting of the links. They are glad that Americans should care for the same things as we care for ourselves, and should share our sports

and hobbies. But the foolish among them seem to wish that we should keep all the playthings on our own side, and that the Americans should come over and see us play with them!

Of course there is another side to these transfers. That the wish of Americans to have more English books should be gratified is in itself wholly good. But the growing certainty that no English institution will be able, and no English gentleman willing, to pay the prices which Americans regard as reasonable, is distinctly disquieting. It has been suggested that in England the quickest road to social distinction is successful horse-racing, and that in America the same result may be obtained by buying a library. If that is so, the advantage is greatly with the Americans. It is quite clear, moreover, that whatever regret may be expressed at these sales it has not yet taken the form of a popular demand that English public institutions shall be more liberally provided with funds with which to compete in the open market. Under present conditions the chief English libraries are absolutely shut out from the competition, so much so that the great dealers often ignore them altogether, and take their finds straight to America.

If the English public cared for these things the fiftieth part of a penny on its income-tax, American competition would become quite harmless. As it is, the only way in which the English public shows its interest is by girding at individual owners who, finding themselves obliged to part with their books, sell them to the highest bidder. As to what constitutes such an "obligation" no one, of course, can

judge without a knowledge of the facts of the case such as only the owner and his most intimate friends can possess. To some book-lovers, we may imagine, the rise in the value of their possessions is a real constraint. To lock up the interest of £15,000 or £20,000 in a hobby may be in reasonable proportion to a man's income, whereas to lock up the interest of £40,000 may be simply selfish. I am quite sure from the talks I had with him twenty years ago, that Mr. Locker himself would have taken this view, and that, along with some natural regret, the thought that the hobby in which he indulged with a half-guilty feeling had turned out an excellent investment would have caused him mingled amusement and pleasure. He certainly always contemplated the possibility that his descendants might some day have a good reason for selling the books, and the sneer which the 'Times' indulged in, when recording the sale, was as wanton as it was cruel.

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